

Of One Essence is the Human Race,
Thusly has Creation put the Base.
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
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The Unconcern'd with Others' Plight,
Are but Brutes with Human Face.

Shaykh Muslih al-Din Sa'di Shirazi
Translated by Iraj Bashiri

بنی آدم اعضای یکدیگرند
که در آفرینش ز یک گوهرند.
چو عضوی بدرد آورد روزگار
دگر عضوها را نماند قرار.
تو کز محنت دیگران بی غمی
نشاید که نامت نهند آدمی.
شیخ مصلح الدین سعدی شیرازی

Shaykh Muslih al-Din Sa'di Shirazi

By
Dr. Iraj Bashiri

Before embarking on this brief note, let us be clear on the fact that only a few documents exist that truly address Sa'di's life directly. In other words, except for the introductory notes where the poet refers to his plans for the composition of the volume, his design for inclusion of stories, and his persuasive words for the benefit of his patron and audience, the wealth of information provided by the narrator of Gulistan, might not be autobiographical. This statement is necessary for three reasons. First it clarifies the uncertainty of the dates of birth and death of the poet; secondly, it points to a lack of definite knowledge regarding the length of time the author devoted to travel; and thirdly, it points to the fact that we know little about his activities during his retirement which spans from 1259 to 1292 and beyond. As things stand, Sa'di could have lived anywhere between 90 and 108 years, traveled for some 20 to 30 years, and rested for a decade or more, something not expected of an energetic man like Sa'di.

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Poet, prose writer and thinker, Muslihuddin Abu Muhammad Abdullah ibn Mushrifuddin Sa'di, also referred to as Shaykh Sa'di and Sa'di Shirazi, was born in Shiraz in or around 1200. He died in Shiraz in or around 1292 of old age.

Little is known about the formative years of the poet's life other than that his father, Mushrifi Shirazi, was a religious man and of a religious persuasion. When Sa'di was about twelve years old, his father passed away and the family came under the protection of Sa'di's uncle who had a small shop in Shiraz. With the help of his uncle, Sa'di completed

his early education in Shiraz. The end of his elementary education coincides roughly with the invasion of Central Asia by Chingiz Khan and the devastation of Khujand, Samarqand, and Bukhara, the Iranian peoples' most cherished cultural centers.

Sa'di left increasingly turbulent Shiraz for Baghdad where he could study the Arabic language, Arab literature, hadith, the Qur'an,and commentaries on the holy book at the Nizamiyyah Academy. Once his education was complete, he left Baghdad and until 1256, traveled extensively in the Middle East, especially in Syria, Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, and Abyssinia and in the eastern Islamic lands, particularly in Turkistan. In the east, he might have traveled as far as India.

Sa'di's travels coincide with a time when Chingiz Khan (1206-1227) passed the scepter of Mongol power to Ogadai Khan (1221-1241) and when, under Khan Mongke (1251-1258), Batu Khan devastated Russia and Eastern Europe. In this respect, Sa'di is very much like Marco Polo who traveled in the region from 1271 to 1294. There is a difference, however, between the two. While Marco Polo gravitated to the potentates and the good life, Sa'di mingled with the ordinary survivors of the Mongol holocaust. He sat in remote teahouses late into the night and exchanged views with merchants, farmers, preachers, wayfarers, thieves, and Sufi mendicants. For twenty years or more, he continued the same schedule of preaching, advising, learning, honing his sermons, and polishing them into gems illuminating the wisdom and foibles of his people.

1256 is the date usually assigned for the time when Sa'di's zeal for travel gave in to his desire to document the fruits of his travels. He returned to his home town of Shiraz which, under Atabak Abubakr Sa'd ibn Zangy (1231-60) was enjoying an era of relative tranquility. Not only was he welcomed to the city but was respected highly by the ruler and enumerated among the greats of the province. In response, Sa'di composed some of his most delightful panegyrics as an initial gesture of gratitude in praise of the ruling house and placed them at the beginning of his Bustan.

Intended as a vehicle for the transmission of his poetic and literary gifts, the Bustan (orchard) is an exquisite piece of didactic poetry composed in 1257. It is comprised of ten sections of verse, each a dissertation on wisdom, justice, compassion, good government, beneficence, earthly and mystic love, resignation, contentment, and humility. Dedicated to Abubakr Zangy, over the centuries, many of its verses have become popular proverbs, an indication of the level of excellence at which the public holds this contribution of the Shaykh.

Within a year of the composition of Bustan, Sa'di authored another volume which he entitled Gulistan. Dedicated to Sa'd ibn Zangy, the Gulistan (rose garden) is intended to pass to subsequent generations the essence of the Shaykh's sermons. The volume consists of a cycle of eight rhymed-prose partitions each interspersed with poetry. The themes discussed include the manners of kings, the morals of dervishes, the preference of contentment, the advantages of keeping silent, as well as youth, old age, and the like. The following, translated by this author, illustrates Sa'di's

attitude towards wealth and authority vis-a-vis freedom and enjoyment of a tranquil life:

> Astride a horse I am not, nor camel-like carry a load,
> Subjects I have none, nor follow any sultan's code;
> I worry not for what exists, nor fret for what is lost,
> I breathe with extreme ease, and live at very little cost.

The volume is melodious in style with a predominance of love in it. It expresses the poet's true emotions in its prose as well as in its exemplary poetry. Furthermore, it is a gold mine for effective use of metaphor displaying mystic love in the guise of earthly love, and is redolent with contempt for priesthood and authority. The first Persian literary contribution to be translated into a Western tongue, the Gulistan was translated by Rahatsek in Banares in 1888.

Sa'di's collected works includes 65 odes out of which 20 are in Arabic. His odes are dedicated to such diverse themes as spring, Shiraz, didactic matters, and religion. Only 20 of his odes are devoted to either advising rulers or praising them. Sa'di also wrote 200 quatrains, 7 elegies, and 737 sonnets.

Sa'di distinguished between the spiritual and the practical or mundane aspects of life. In his Bustan, for example, spiritual Sa'di uses the mundane world as a springboard to propel himself beyond the earthly realms. The images in Bustan are delicate in nature and soothing. In the Gulistan, on the other hand, mundane Sa'di lowers the spiritual to touch the heart of his fellow wayfarers. Here the images are graphic and, thanks to Sa'di's dexterity, remain concrete in the reader's mind. Realistically, too, there is a ring of truth

in the division. The Shaykh preaching in the Khaniqah experiences a totally different world than the merchant passing through a town. The unique thing about Sa'di is that he embodies both the Sufi Shaykh and the traveling merchant. They are, as he himself puts it, two almond kernels in the same shell.

Although Sa'di's name is associated with many famous names in the West, three have been instrumental in the development of his persona. Sir William Jones, for whom Sa'di was a household name while in India, introduced Sa'di to England. From there, Sa'di's fame traveled to Europe and was picked up by Victor Hugo, Honore-de Balzac, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who added an international dimension to Sa'di's fame and moved it across the Atlantic in the direction of the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau. Among the devoted readers of this distinguished international group of poets, Sa'di became as well-known as Omar Khayyam is known today.

Fame, however, is a fleeting thing. Back in Britain, using Sa'di's volumes as a textbook for learning the Persian language, Edward Fitzgerald prepared his first edition of the Ruba'iyyat of Omar Khayyam and published it anonymously (1859). Its appeal surpassed that of the works of Sa'di. In fact the popularity that the second edition of the Ruba'iyyat received was unmatched by any other translation of secular Asian poetry into English. Neither translations of Sa'di's quatrains nor the translation of his other works in quatrain form could turn the tide. Sa'di was thus forced to share his fame with Khayyam and later with Hafiz.

Sa'di's prose style, described as "simple but impossible to imitate" flows quite naturally and effortlessly. Its simplicity, however, is grounded in a semantic web consisting of synonymy, homophony, and oxymoron buttressed by internal rhythm and external rhyme. Iranian authors over the years have failed to imitate its style in their own language, how can foreigners translate it into their own language, no matter what language?

After the composition of the Gulistan, in 1258, Sa'di went into retirement and was heard of no more. He is the quintessential Muslim humanist, the first such wise man to be recognized in the West.

The world honors Sa'di today by gracing the entrance to the Hall of Nations in the United Nations in New York City with a call for breaking all barriers. In the present author's translation, it reads:

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A Brief Chronology

1200?	Sa'di is born in Shiraz
1206	Temuchin takes the title of Chingiz Khan
1220	The Khwarazm Shah is defeated by Chingiz Khan; Sa'di's primary education in Shiraz ends
1226	Sa'di's education at the Baghdad Nizamiyyah ends
1227	Chingiz Khan dies
1241	Greater part of Russia is subjugated by Batu Khan
1243	Mongols defeat Seljuqs of Rum near Sivas
1256	Hulagu Khan takes Assassin stronghold of Alamut; Berke, Batu Khan's brother, accepts Islam; Sa'di's travels end
1257	Sa'di's Bustan is completed
1258	Hulagu Khan takes Baghdad; Sa'di's Gulistan is completed
1259	Sa'di's retirement begins
1260	Mongols defeated by the Mamluks at 'Ayn Jalut
1271	Marco Polo travels through Persia to China
1273	Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi dies
1290?	Sa'di dies in Shiraz